Unusual nests of São Tomé Weaver
Ploceus sanctithomae

Ben Fisher

Des nids inhabituels du Tisserin de Sao Tomé *Ploceus sanctithomae*. Un nid du Tisserin de Sao Tomé *Ploceus sanctithomae* remarquablement volumineux a été collecté par l'auteur en janvier 1998 près de Lagoa Amelia, Sao Tomé. Ce nid est en forme de cornue et comporte trois entrées: un tunnel d'entrée pointant vers le bas de 17 cm de long, une entrée dans la paroi de la chambre du nid, et un deuxième tunnel, de 5 cm, en dessous de la chambre (Fig. 1). Un autre nid collecté a également une entrée de côté, mais un tunnel seulement, tandis qu'un troisième a deux tunnels mais pas d'entrée de côté. Ainsi, il apparaît que le Tisserin de Sao Tomé construit deux types de nid (un nid 'normal' et un autre à plusieurs entrées), ce qui semble être unique parmi les tisserins du genre *Ploceus*, car aucune autre espèce n'est connue pour construire un nid à plusieurs entrées. L'auteur se demande si cela, en combinaison avec la coloration terne de l'espèce et son bec long et fin, ne constituerait pas un argument pour ressusciter le genre monotypique *Thomasophantes*.

On 18 January 1998 I collected a nest of São Tomé Weaver *Ploceus sanctithomae* (hereafter nest A) on the slopes below Lagoa Amelia, São Tomé. It was suspended on its own from the branch of a tree in open secondary forest at a height of *c.*10 m. As no birds were present and the nest was empty, it was probably vacant, although if it was a roosting nest (see below) the birds would, of course, been absent. It is retort shaped with a straight, 17 cm-long tube and consists of tendrils over a layer of grey skeletal leaves. Local guides positively identified the nest as belonging to São Tomé Weaver when shown the depiction of the bird in Christy & Clarke (1998). However, the nest appears unusually bulky for a bird of its size, with the walls of the tube being at least 1 cm in diameter, and even more unusual is that it has three entrances: a normal downward-pointing tube, a hole at the side of the nest chamber, and a second tube 5 cm long below the nest chamber (Fig. 1). The side entrance appears as a pale spot because of the exposed skeletal leaves. The other three weaver species on the island have different-shaped nests: in Southern Masked *P. velatus* and Village Weaver *P. cucullatus* these are kidney shaped without an entrance tube or, in the case of the latter, only a short one (Collias & Collias 2004, Oschadleus 2004), and in Giant Weaver *P. grandis* it is a very large oval structure woven into branches and without an entrance tube (Craig 2004).

Figure 1. Nest of São Tomé Weaver *Ploceus sanctithomae* with three entrances (nest A); entrances indicated by arrows (Martin Woodcock)

Nid du Tisserin de Sao Tomé *Ploceus sanctithomae* comportant trois entrées, indiquées par des flèches (Martin Woodcock)

I collected two other, old, nests of São Tomé Weaver (B and C), suspended *c.*4 m above ground. Nest B also has a side entrance, which was clearly visible from the ground, but only one tube entrance. Nest C has two tube entrances but no side entrance, although there appears to be the beginnings of one. Because of the age of these nests the tubes may have been lost, or the nests may not have been completed. Given their compact structure, it is highly unlikely that the side entrance would be the result of damage.

An early description of the nest of this species by Bocage, quoted by Bannerman (1949), described the nest as 'communal...the various cavities united by a common passage'. No mention is made of a second or third entrance, but one wonders whether Bocage made his 'communal' assumption because he saw birds entering and leaving by different entrances. No subsequent authors mention the nest being communal. Snow (1950) was given a nest—'round with a funnel pointing downwards'—with apparently no unusual features, and de Naurois' (1994) description of the exit tube being like the opening of a trumpet does not tally with my nest A. Dissecting nest B (with a single tube entrance) revealed a single chamber, as expected. Nests A and C (with two tube entrances) have the 'nest chamber' above the second tube and may be roosting nests only. These could indeed be 'communal'. All this appears to indicate that São Tomé Weaver constructs two types of nest.

No other species within the genus *Ploceus* is known to have a nest with more than one entrance, nor a separate roosting nest (Fry & Keith 2004). Little intraspecific variation in nest structure has been detected and this appears to be confined to materials used, type of suspension and length of tube; none of these are considered fundamental (Crook 1963). Thus, the nesting habits of São Tomé Weaver may prove to be unique and this may perhaps, together with the bird's subdued plumage colouration and long, fine bill (characters put forward by previous authors), constitute rationale to return the species to the monotypic genus *Thomasophantes*. Hopefully, this note may encourage others to study breeding birds and to elucidate the questions raised by the multiple-entry nests.

Acknowledgements

I thank Rita Covas, Ron Demey, Robert J. Dowsett, Martim Melo and Alan Tye for their comments on a draft of this note and Martin Woodcock for his illustration. I also thank my son Roland for accompanying me, as without his enthusiasm and knowledge of Portuguese the nest would never have been collected.

References

Bannerman, D. A. 1949. *The Birds of Tropical West Africa.* Vol. 7. London, UK: Crown Agents.

Christy, P. & Clarke, W.V. 1998. *Guide des Oiseaux de São Tomé et Príncipe.* São Tomé: ECOFAC.

Collias, N. E. & Collias, E. C. 2004. *Ploceus cucullatus.* In Fry, C. H. & Keith, S. (eds.) *The Birds of Africa.* Vol. 7. London, UK: Christopher Helm.

Craig, A. J. F. K. 2004. *Ploceus sanctithomae.* In Fry, C. H. & Keith, S. (eds.) *The Birds of Africa.* Vol. 7. London, UK: Christopher Helm.

Crook, J. H. 1963. A comparative analysis of nest structure in the weaver birds (Ploceinae). *Ibis* 105: 238–262.

Fry, C. H. & Keith, S. (eds.) 2004. *The Birds of Africa.* Vol. 7. London, UK: Christopher Helm.

Naurois, R. de 1994. *Les Oiseaux des Iles du Golfe de Guinée/As Aves das Ilhas do Golfo da Guiné.* Lisbon: Instituto de Investigação Científica Tropical.

Oschadleus, D. 2004. *Ploceus velatus.* In Fry, C. H. & Keith, S. (eds.) *The Birds of Africa.* Vol. 7. London, UK: Christopher Helm.

Snow, D. W. 1950. The birds of Sao Tomé and Príncipe in the Gulf of Guinea. *Ibis* 92: 579–595.

Beaumont House, Beaumont-cum-Moze, Essex CO16 0AR, UK. E-mail: fisherbeaumont@talk21.com